

A Passionate Journey

From grass roots activism
to international
governance

2004 Sir Walter Murdoch Lecture
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When asked to deliver the Sir Walter Murdoch Lecture for 2004 I found myself wondering what I could say that would add value to contemporary thought in Australia and maintain the standard of my distinguished predecessors. As I am most comfortable speaking of personal and political experience and passion I have chosen to speak tonight of my journey from grass roots activism to international governance.

It allows me to illustrate why the personal is political. It also seems a fitting way to pay my respect to the work and memory of Sir Walter Murdoch –by all accounts a man who spoke his mind.

It's been 40 years since I went on my first journey outside Australia and although I had already been a teacher of History and Geography for three years I saw the globe as a teaching tool rather than a place to explore. Fortunately I married a man who was compelled to travel and in 1964, like many young Australians, we left for London on the required six-week ocean voyage. Most of the passengers were young Australians like us, newly married and eager to have different lives in places many of our parents still referred to as home despite having absolutely no tangible connection to it or to anyone there.

Before we disembarked in a predictably grey Portsmouth we had visited Singapore, Colombo, Aden and Cairo – exotic places with sensory overdrive for the monochrome Australians we were. But those first experiences in foreign places were powerful and confronting. We were shocked that we were so ignorant about the rest of the world, a world to which we did not seem to be linked. It was, after all, the time of White Australia and television was relatively new in the Australian household. I did not own one. So the global images which today the world receives daily were not part of our world. Australia was our world and we felt safe and secure and had little commitment to people in other parts of the world. With the exception of the Colombo Plan students, few of us would have had opportunities to meet with people from different cultures.

For the next three years we lived and worked in London and Pittsburgh. In my professional life I was confronted on a daily basis with difference. The Commonwealth citizens from former British colonies were collecting their dues from Britain. Families were benefiting from free education and an excellent public health system. When my husband's peers in the city complained about West Indians and Cypriots bringing the country to its knees I felt able to retaliate. There had to be a responsibility that arose from colonisation and repaying it through health and education was admirable. I doubt that I convinced them but we argued with passion about those interconnected global responsibilities.

The lives of my students in the secondary school where I taught and the adventure playground I managed were changed by these opportunities as indeed was I. My new secondary, comprehensive school in the then unfashionable Fulham flourished under the benevolent guidance of Michael Stewart, the local Member and Foreign Secretary in the new Labour Government of Howard Wilson. He and his wife assumed responsibilities on the school board and ensured that teachers were given opportunities to express political opinions and use political expression as a means of driving change.

In Pittsburgh in 1966-67, when Lyndon Baines Johnson was President, my secondary school students were required to do community service as part of their education. They were encouraged to support Operation Head Start which offered opportunities for black children to have access to a pre-school education so they did not enter the school system at disadvantage. As a teacher of Problems of Democracy and American History it was thought legitimate to encourage students to be politically thoughtful and active as that's what produced effective citizens in a democracy. While subversive political activism was not explicitly encouraged, it was not seen as a hanging offence when students and teachers joined marches in Washington as protests against the War in Vietnam. This was a long way from my experience.

When we returned to Australia it did not seem the lotus land we recalled from the northern hemisphere. The sun was shining as we flew into Sydney. The harbour sparkled and the Australian light was more magical than I had ever imagined. The material comforts were there and we could afford to buy a modest house. But we had new antennae about what mattered. Vietnam did. Speaking out did. Understanding what you stood for did.

As a newly pregnant woman I was confronted almost immediately with the fact that I could not continue my professional life. Even though I worked casually I would be paid at a rate that ignored my three years of professional experience abroad. The rationalisation offered was, 'We don't count that experience here.' Rather a narrow view, I thought.

It seemed that my chances of a career in education were severely compromised by my foolish decision to become a mother. Yet all the signs of social approval suggested that this was my destiny and my responsibility. I could not have imagined that parenthood would disqualify one from being an effective teacher.

My choices about birthing were limited and I was advised to let the obstetrician make the decisions and all would be well. It seemed a long way from the birthing experiences I'd observed in London – where women had the choice to birth at home with midwives and support from a Flying Squad. And their families could be a part of the experience.

I decided to find an obstetrician who would support such independence. Fortunately I found one. We agreed that as I was having the baby, I should and could be an equal and active participant in the pregnancy and birth. He suggested I join the Childbirth Education Association (CEA) where I would meet like-minded people.

This was my first lobby group. Within a short time my husband and I were working on the committee with our first objective to ensure that husbands could be present at the births of their babies. Most hospitals refused to allow this. How quaint it seems now when birth in hospital is about choice of place and method and the extended family is encouraged to be there.

Such success inevitably led to other activities and when the Childbirth Education Association was invited by the Abortion Law Reform Association to support it, I became connected to women who were passionate about abortion as a woman's right. The whole notion of women having rights was a new idea in Australia. But the Women's Liberation Movement and the writings of feminist women around the world framed the new women's movement in terms of rights. It was underscored by the desires of women to have control over their major life experiences.

Education, travel, parenthood in the company of women led me to found the Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972 with a small group of women. We wanted to find out where we fitted in Australian society. Our poll of political candidates standing for election in 1972 provided many of the answers and it still resonates. Responses to questions about attitudes and issues of concern to women were often shocking and demonstrated a lack of understanding of women's lives and their aspirations to be responsible citizens and leaders. My favourite response to our poll was that of the Member for Bennelong, Sir John Cramer, who in answer to the question, 'What is a woman's most valuable attribute?' said, 'A woman's most prized possession is her virginity.'

It remains a call for action for those of us who have no such residual value.

The rise of the Women's Electoral Lobby and the leadership of government in women's affairs ensured that the seventies was a decade of consciousness-raising. The results were impressive for Australian women. In my two areas of passion, education and family planning, the achievements were breathtaking. The luxury cosmetics tax was removed from oral contraceptives, family planning clinics and services were established and primarily managed by community-based groups of women through the Family Planning Association. Sex became sexuality and a more respectable part of our social discourse. Teenage pregnancies were reduced, termination of pregnancy was placed on the Medical Benefits Schedule, if not off the Crimes Act of most states, and police forces for the most part stopped harassing patients at termination clinics.

The government-commissioned report on Girls, School and Society highlighted the barriers to the education of girls and offered educational opportunity for mature age women who enrolled in droves and ensured that their daughters stayed at school. We continue to see those results in our universities today.

For women like myself it demonstrated that grass roots activism could work. We could make a difference. Working on the assumption that the personal is political, we understood that it is the internal politics of people's lives that persuade us to support some changes and causes more than others. There has to be a personal passion for most of us to do the things we do. If we are to change the communities we inhabit, we need to find a space for our leadership.

We need leadership and good governance from government and institutions for the changes to be sustainable. The Whitlam government set the example and when the first UN International Conference on Women was held in Mexico City in 1975 the Whitlam government sent an Australian delegation. It was a pragmatic and symbolic recognition of the rights of women and marked the beginning of a broader understanding of the commonalities of women's lives around the world. It also recognised that grass roots action was effective in creating change and was in fact setting the international agenda.

Five years later international pressure to think globally about women's rights resulted in the UN holding a mid-decade conference in Copenhagen. The Fraser government sent a large delegation to both the formal UN meeting and the NGO Forum which I attended. This support and leadership meant that women were being encouraged to forge relationships on a global level, connect with other women leaders and play our role in acting globally to improve the lives of women and children. At Copenhagen the key agenda item which had been rehearsed for a year in Australia prior to the meeting was the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Our Australian Minister, Bob Ellicott signed the Convention at the conference, although it was not ratified until some years later by the Hawke government.

At the forum the most powerful debates were around reproductive rights. I was already involved with the politics of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) through my role as the Executive Director of the Australian Federation of Family Planning Associations. But even I was not prepared for the stories of female circumcision (which the conference renamed as female genital mutilation). It was the beginning of a continuing worldwide campaign to outlaw this practice.

At the third UN meeting in Beijing in 1995, the agenda item that dominated was women in decision-making and leadership. Women who were engaged in grass roots activism were looking for leadership spaces in international governance. Gertrude Mongella, an outstanding African woman, ran the Conference and provided outstanding leadership. In a sense these three UN meetings demonstrated the shifting agendas of women across the world.

Australians have a proud record of assuming leadership roles internationally. Jessie Street, Elizabeth Evatt played significant roles in the United Nations to improve the status of women. James Wolfensohn, Chief of the World Bank, Anne Summers, Greenpeace International – all are outstanding people whose lives have been concerned with humanity across national borders. Esme Odgers, an Australian whose name is not a household one, was among the founder members of Plan in 1937 when it was created to care for refugee children of the Spanish Civil War.

After delivering this lecture I leave Perth to attend the Executive Committee Meeting of Plan International, an organisation dedicated to working with poor children, active in 60 countries around the world. Sharing the responsibility for the governance of one of the world's largest non-government organisations (NGOs) is not a task I take lightly. And yet I feel my role in PLAN completes the circle of education and reproduction, the circle of my passions about the lives of women and children.

PLAN makes long-term commitments to children living in poverty and from its inception has operated on the belief that one person can make a difference to the life of a child. It's a simple proposition and sponsorship is the financial mechanism of the relationship. But our organisational aim is to assist as many children as possible to realise their potential. And because our primary income comes from sponsors and these funds are not tied to a particular project or time, we can make long-term commitments to children and their families. It's a perfect way to think globally and act locally.

I became involved with Plan when approached to become a director. I had no prior knowledge of the organisation and was quite surprised to be invited to join. Somewhere in my consciousness I had imagined I would work globally in family planning. My passion for women having the opportunity to have

choice and success in managing their fertility still mattered. I expressed an interest and it was made clear that part of the commitment would be to sponsor a child.

I confess I was a reluctant child sponsor, concerned that the relationship was paternalistic and that one cannot make a difference on the scale of world poverty. I recited all the clichés about where the money went and not wanting to favour one child in a family or a village. But I finally faced the proposition that doing nothing was a poor option. It was difficult to see what else one could do to make a statement about caring across national borders. My global opportunity had arrived.

People say that charity begins at home, that we should tackle the problem of poverty at home before we look abroad. Does that mean that the life of a person from a different race or nation is of less account than someone from our own? Should that person have lesser rights? Should we care about the rest of the world? These are proper questions for Australians to debate.

Currently we could interpret that this is the case. The Australian government puts requirements on overseas agencies such as Plan not to undertake any family planning components in its activities unless the organisation is accredited by AUSAID to implement family planning activities. This is hardly an holistic approach.

Furthermore the document outlining the guiding principles for Australian assistance for family planning activities notes that Australian aid funds are not available for activities that involve abortion training, services, research trials or activities that directly involve abortion drugs. This denies women in other countries the rights that Australian women enjoy. We are therefore better served with contraceptive services than our sisters in other parts of the world.

We might argue that those to whom we might give charity are already able to provide for their basic needs and seem poor only relative to our own high standard of living.

The US demonstrates that that is the case. Within three months of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the US had a public fund of \$1.3 billion available for the victims. Yet two days later the UNICEF report on the state of the world's children was released. There was no public appeal following its publication which detailed the numbers of children dying daily and at risk around the world.

We must draw the conclusion that their lives are seen as of lesser value.

Should we act if, at a small cost, a person can save a child's life?

The issue of foreign aid is a matter about which all of us in the developed world should be concerned. Citizens in the United States should be particularly troubled for among the developed nations of the world ranked according to the proportion of the gross national product (GNP) that they give as development aid, the US comes indisputably last.

In order to address increasing world poverty, the United Nations, the World Bank and other major international organisations brought together representatives of 191 countries in September 2000 to adopt the Millennium Declaration which set out the Millennium Development Goals) and targets to achieve them.

Do we know as citizens that our government has made a commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The goals were to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, improve maternal health, reduce child mortality, combat HIV AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. Even a less feminised reader of this list would concede that it is the lives of women and children who are most at risk if these goals are not met.

Remember of those people defined as living in poverty, 75% are women. We can be sure that children will be sharing their mothers' circumstances.

We must ask whether Australia is doing its fair share towards the Millennium Development Goals. The Treasurer, Peter Costello, when speaking at a meeting of the Australian Council For International Development (ACFID) said, 'Despite plans to the contrary by some, the evidence shows that we are well on the way to meeting the target although progress towards the goals is uneven.

'The most outstanding success is East Asia and the most disappointing region is sub-Saharan Africa. Progress has been made towards the goal of achieving universal primary education with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. Less progress has been made towards the goal of reducing child mortality with only 22% of the developing world's population currently on track to meet this target. Closer to home a number of countries in the Pacific are unlikely to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and some are even regressing.'

His strong theme is that it was not aid but trade and economic reform that has delivered millions from poverty. He concluded, 'There is a growing consensus that development cannot happen unless countries can establish progress in areas of governance, law and order and economic management. Australia is doing its utmost to help in these areas.'

Leaders in the aid and development community do not deny the power of trade and economic reform in addressing poverty but question the narrowness of this prescription, particularly for the poorest countries in Africa. Such countries are denied access to trade their way out of problems by the massive trade barriers erected by the US and EU. It seems hypocritical to preach trade as a solution while at the same time blocking imports. The truth is aid works and is a powerful adjunct to trade and economic reform in bringing about broad-based improvement. Trade and economic reform messages should not be used to justify meagre aid levels.

There was also no mention in Costello's speech of progress with programs to promote gender equality and empower women. It seems we have a leadership deficit and this would not be difficult to put right as we know what works.

For example, Microfinance programs based on the Grameen Bank model demonstrate daily the effectiveness of providing small home loans and saving facilities to women. They invariably use the money to improve the lives of their families. Plan works in partnership with local microfinance organisations to establish and support these programs as we know that this has a positive impact on the lives of children. AUSAID has only recently had a microfinance desk.

The stories are inspiring and on a team visit to the Philippines in 1999 I witnessed the transformation in the lives of many families who are offered a helping hand.

Our Treasurer's view of Australia's contribution to meeting the Millennium Development Goals is not shared by ACFID. In response to the budget papers of 2004-5, while welcoming the increased funding of 10% in real terms and acknowledging the contribution is now .26% of gross national income (GNI) expressed its concern that the increase in aid and development budget is focused on law and order in the region. It warned there can be no durable peace and security in our region without sustained investments in reducing poverty and social inequity.

The Treasurer's rhetoric is not matched by any real action. Australia is falling far short of the aid needed to achieve these goals. In terms of overseas development assistance we ranked 14th out of 22 OECD countries in 2003 and by 2006 we are likely to rank 20th – joining the USA at the bottom of the table.

The good news is that last year, over 1.6 million Australians donated \$383 million to overseas aid and development programs that address basic needs and give people hope and a better life. This reflects the longer term trend of strong growth averaging 11% over the last 5 years in Australian support for community aid and development. So funds from the community continue to provide the largest proportion of money for overseas work undertaken by Australian NGOs.

However, we still spend more on pet food than overseas aid. The Australia Institute Report on consumption of pet food in Australia published in July 2004 estimated that Australians spend more than \$2.2 billion on their pets compared to foreign aid spending of less than \$2 billion. The report found that pets were increasingly regarded as family members, often considered as substitutes for children. This certainly presents a challenge.

Public ignorance and political misunderstanding remain barriers to official development assistance (ODA). There's no evidence that this will change as the budget line item for development education for AUSAID is \$2.8 million. This is to cover expenditure on media, outreach publications, Internet and global education activities. In NGOs such as Plan where we promise to spend no more than 20 cents in the dollar on administration, there are no funds to run major public education programs. We must rely on building relationships through sponsorship and encouraging our sponsors to support our special appeals.

At a recent conference on overseas aid, John Langmore – for some years the Labor member for Canberra – wrote that politicians underestimate the extent of public support for aid. He highlighted the study of attitudes about foreign policy in 1995 by the University of Maryland's Program for International Policy Attitudes (PIPA). When asked how much the US was spending on foreign aid a strong majority thought they were spending far too much and it should be cut. The median estimate was between 10% and 20% when in fact expenditure is less than 1%. When asked what an appropriate percentage would be, the median response was 5%, an increase on the amount of what is actually spent beyond the wildest hopes of any foreign aid advocate on Capitol Hill.

A few months later the *Washington Post* decided to run its own survey to see if the results held up. It got an even higher median estimate – that 20% was spent on foreign aid. Follow-up surveys with different samples got much the same results. So the US public's misconception of foreign aid is consistent.

After the setting of the Millennium Goals, a conducted survey showed strong support for these goals. 75% said they would be willing to pay an extra \$50 to help a program that cut all hunger in half by 2003. It seems that governments are not hearing this or have decided support should be an individual action.

Of course we need to treat some of these survey results with caution. People like to present themselves as being more fair and generous than they really are but it is clear that Americans are woefully ignorant about their foreign aid record. What they would really want to do if they knew the truth is less clear.

The World Bank estimates to achieve the Millennium Goals it would cost \$40-60 billion per year in additional aid for the next 15 years. If 75% of Americans over 18 years old contributed \$50 more, then US \$7.5 billion per year would be raised. Not quite enough for the American share, for the additional sum needed, but a good start.

But if American leaders continue to give attention only to the needs of their own, and our own leaders adopt the same view, what should citizens of rich countries do? We are not powerless. We can decide to make a difference by supporting organisations where aid helps those in need.

We have the opportunity to save the lives of children. We can give to organisations whose track record shows they make a difference. Our major dilemma is to consider how much we might give to save the life of a child threatened by the cycle of poverty. The World Bank and our own results tell us that aid works when it is directed to countries with the aim of reducing poverty rather than to countries which would further our strategic cultural and military interests. Also the effectiveness of aid is enhanced when it is given to countries that are poor but have reasonably good and stable governments.

World Bank President, ex-pat James Wolfensohn said in an interview in *The Australian* earlier this year, 'I personally feel the world is out of balance. The way the world is dealing with problems of poverty and peace seem to be disconnected. Military spending worldwide is probably now US \$1,000 billion. Meanwhile rich countries offer no more than \$50-\$60 billion in aid to developing countries while blocking most of their agricultural exports. One of the few ways these countries might pull themselves out of poverty.

'The three things are linked – of the five billion people living in the developing world, three billion earn under US\$2 per day and 1.2 billion under US\$1 per day. If you cannot give them hope – which comes from getting a job or doing something productive, giving them their self respect – these people become the basis on which terrorists or renegades or advocacy groups can flourish. It's an essentially unstable situation. We now have 1.5 billion children under the age of 15 living in poverty. If you cannot deal with the question of hope of economic security, there's no way with military expenditure you can have peace.

'My message is a simple one. You cannot take your eye off the ball of poverty. I hope that's a view Australia will take.'

It's a view I want to encourage and there are many Australians who heed that message. Plan alone has over 33,000 Australians contributing daily to the lives of children throughout the world and World Vision the market leader has many more.

As I acquire grandchildren and compare their life opportunities with my sponsored children and the children in programs I visit around the world, it seems an even stronger imperative to increase my capacity for giving. It also ensures that my governance role is founded in reality.

In *One World*, Peter Singer hypothesises that to eliminate poverty we could distribute the task amongst all the 600 million adults in high-income countries. The additional \$40-60 billion in aid required to achieve the Millennium Development Goals could be met by a donation of US \$100 per year for the next 15 years. We could eliminate global poverty faster than the Millennium Development Goals propose by asking people to give 1% of their annual income. If we can make *One World* a moral standard that transcends a national state, should we do so or are the benefits of globalisation to be about trade and not people?

Let me end by quoting from a poem by a remarkable woman, Justice Unity Dow, the first female High Court judge in Botswana who wrote to her children:

‘Trudge not through life, leaving ugly gashes,
Tiptoe not through life, leaving half-formed impressions,
Tread gently, lovingly; leave graceful heart prints,
Love the Earth, for she loves you so.’

Thank you.

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